



TRADE UNION ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
TO THE ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC  
COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT  
COMMISSION SYNDICALE CONSULTATIVE  
AUPRÈS DE L'ORGANISATION DE COOPÉRATION  
ET DE DÉVELOPPEMENT ÉCONOMIQUES

## KEY TRADE UNION PROPOSALS FOR INCLUSIVE AND EFFECTIVE SKILLS SYSTEMS

**OECD Skills Summit, Bergen, Norway**

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A forward looking skills policy must include three inter-linked elements: skill creation; smooth transitions from learning to earning; and the use of skills for raising productivity and well-being. The design and implementation of policies to support the development and dissemination of employee skills and capabilities must become an essential part of a skills policy mix. Strategies to close existing gaps in the use of skills also must address the impact that new forms of non-standard employment and high rates of structural and youth unemployment are having on skill formation and skill use. Full involvement of trade unions in each of these areas is essential for a successful skills policy.

**Recognize the Role of Unions** as key stakeholders. This must recognise both industrial unions (representing future and current workers and engaging as actors in training design, implementation, counselling, oversight, funding, and in labour market integration programmes as well in lifelong learning provision) and teacher unions (representing teachers and education workers and developing curricula, new approaches to learning, securing quality working conditions for teaching professionals and quality learning systems for children and young adults).

There is strong evidence of a **positive association between unionization and collective bargaining with the use of skills at work**. Social Partnership on skills should be recognised at all levels, including in OECD recommendations. It must be supported by strengthening the following aspects of union involvement in skills systems including in:

- The design and revision of early education, school systems, VET programmes, higher education and national, regional and local skills policies
- Management decisions at the firm level on work-based training (often reached through collective bargaining)
- Terms and working conditions of apprentices and adult learners
- Financing of VET through collective schemes based on tripartite bodies
- Career guidance, design and implementation of work based training programmes

- Oversight on the implementation of training schemes, the use of hiring subsidies and general working conditions.

Giving workers voice through unions helps greater buy-in from workers; more and better employer investment; higher quality design and delivery of training; more equal opportunities for all workers to access opportunities for training and better integration of skills and employment. Workers have a right to a major say in their training - for both practical and principal reasons. Greater rights and opportunities for trade union representatives therefore should be provided to enable them to develop a detailed skills agenda. Unions will find it difficult to engage unless they are given opportunities for real involvement. At the national policy level, unions should be involved as social partners in the design of education, skills and innovation policies. Equally, unions should be involved in discussing design and implementation at local workplace level. To fulfil these functions unions may need help in building capacity.

**More emphasis on quality.** A minimum of two years is required for apprenticeships, together with fair wages in work-based learning, curricula that tie well with current and up-coming challenges in societies and future labour markets are essential, while further developing socio-emotional and problem-solving competencies, and frameworks to help transitioning into the world of work. All vocational courses where dual VETs are not part of the skills system should include a substantial element of work experience. All workers should have an equal opportunity to engage in lifelong learning.

**Substantially increased funding from both state and employers** (e.g. via collective levies) is needed to ensure that teaching and equipment are properly funded, and teaching staff are well paid. Unions should be involved in oversight of such funding systems to ensure that: they are not diverted by employers to substitute for training that employers would have provided themselves, so that all employers bear their fair share, and that the training structure meets the objectives of quality and fairness.

**Collective learning** with the right balance between practical and theoretical pedagogy while taking the interests, prior learning and socio-economic background including work experience, of students into account.

**Careers guidance** at school should be enhanced with an equal value attached to academic and vocational routes within and beyond school.

**Priority must be given to the most disadvantaged**, including migrants and young people finding it hard to enter the labour market, including those that are “Not in Employment, Education or Training” (NEETs), older workers who would benefit from training opportunities, low income earners, those with particular needs such as single parents, or learners with disabilities. Disadvantaged learners are not homogeneous. Unions have substantial experience of the needs of vulnerable groups, who are frequently ill served by skills systems.

The importance of workplace and employer level negotiation should be recognised, within a national and sectoral framework that includes unions. **Developing a Skills System based on social partnership** will need to build on the capacity of both partners, including small and medium enterprises. This may, for example, include financial support for training of union and employer representatives on issues around skills policy including apprenticeship design, pedagogy, and accreditation and funding systems.

**THE BERGEN SKILLS SUMMIT**

The governments' focus and responsibility should be on long term learning needs. It is therefore important to build broad political consensus around the main features of a future-oriented competence system.

The conceptual difference between skills and competences is to a large extent what the OECD usually refers to as 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, or social and emotional skills. TUAC agrees that these will become more important in a future with more rapid technological, environmental and societal changes. The overarching question is therefore how societies can be prepared for these developments. Education and skills systems and the systematic learning outside these systems plays a decisive role to better foster competencies, and put them to effective use from early learning to adult training. Therefore, quality education systems and a lifelong learning culture should be supported as central pillars towards building inclusive societies and sustainable growth.

The outlook on how we value and evaluate learning in the system must change. Assessment systems intended to evaluate learning outcomes impact on learning goals and the learning process. Up until now most of these assessments, including the OECD's comparative studies based on rankings, have delivered a limited view on education and learning because only a narrow selection of cognitive, basic skills have been measured. If we want to foster innovation and to improve productivity and well-being, a higher value must be placed on broader competencies and varied learning pathways.

Learning requires a long term perspective, and education and skills systems change slowly. To adapt learning to new specialized needs, education systems must be strengthened to take on the main responsibility for generic competencies and general values, while the world of work and higher education must take the main responsibility for teaching specialized skills linked to needs in different work sectors and occupations.

The interplay between the competence base, the innovative capacities of economies and the immediate competence needs of companies is a dynamic one. The overarching goal should be to develop a population and a workforce that can adapt to both cyclical changes in the economy and the impact of technological disruptions to specific sectors.

The emphasis on fostering a whole of government approach is important but has been hard to achieve in practice up until now. In regard to whole-of-society approaches, governments need to clearly outline and commit to partnerships with stakeholders, especially to social partners and to tri-partite social dialogue.

Investment in skills over the past decade has been hit by economic stagnation, little net job creation in the past decade and job polarization, and is intrinsically linked to workplace structures. Going forward, to build a stronger, more sustainable economy and labour markets based on competence and skill development, policies should be formulated in line with the following factors:

- Business settings (e.g. the type of product market, competitive strategies, business organisations/relations, financial system)
- Institutions and policy frameworks (VET and non-VET)
- Modes of engaging trade unions (employment relationship)
- Structure of jobs (job design and work organisation)
- Level and type of skills formation (e.g. early childhood education, schools, apprenticeships, higher education and informal on-the-job training).

## THE OECD'S FOCUS AND ROLE

Policies and recommendations should be guided by foresight and dialogue not technological determinism or austerity. The OECD's call for "innovative approaches to finance and deliver[ing] major public services" should be carefully considered against balancing the risks coming from private financing of primary and secondary level education systems – in contrast to the legitimate need for company funding of adult and VET training. A more nuanced approach depending on the education level is therefore more appropriate.

Based on the topics addressed at the Skills Summit, including the goal to "activate skills by 2025" and ongoing OECD work, TUAC recommends a review of specific areas of work, as follows:

- **Analyse the impact of education and training systems on labour market outcomes and career development for employees**, including the effects of employer and union representation on governing bodies, Skills Councils and in policy design;
- **Effective use of skills and competencies**: Evaluate management practices, the responsibility of employers in the provision of on-the-job training, the role of workers' representatives in the use of skills, training provision, design of tasks and employee motivation. In addition, analyse the benefits of informal learning and of retaining tacit knowledge against unstable and insecure jobs, and analyse the factors which best support strong social partnership on skills.
- **Skills mismatches**: (1) shift the focus of the assessment of alleged skills supply shortages to their root causes including failed labour market policies, low wages for higher- and medium-skilled jobs, economic downturns, and slow business innovation processes; (2) highlight ways in which employers should tackle the underlying challenge, including through wage incentives and appropriate up-skilling frameworks; (3) employ a granular analytical approach to skills gaps by analyzing specific sectors and tasks within occupations to derive policy recommendations focused on individual development and employability into quality jobs.
- **Future competencies**: Develop a roadmap to address the automation and offshoring of certain tasks within jobs with clear guidance on funding needs of public education and training systems, including support and training for teaching and education staff, for VET and apprenticeship programmes as well as parameters for on-the-job training – including paid educational leave to promote a life-long-learning culture that enables people across all age groups and qualification levels to acquire basic, advanced and/ or specialist digital skills, as well as problem-solving, and socio-emotional competencies.

To help anticipation of future skills needs, trade unions can play an important role in collecting employment data of their members from most economic sectors. Trade unions provide support and counselling to members and non-members on labour market needs and training opportunities, also for young people entering Higher Education and VET systems.

- **Equality of opportunity for vulnerable groups**: Analyse and address difficulties of access to education and training for vulnerable groups, including NEETs, by evaluating a variety of educational approaches and active labour market policies.
- **Fostering migrant integration**: Continue building on recent OECD work with an emphasis on the right policy and financing mix in view of qualification recognition systems, language training, early integration in mainstream classes and tertiary VET programmes. At the same time, focus on over-concentration in classrooms, identify approaches to support teaching professionals as well as targeted programmes for unaccompanied minors and young adults.

- **Social Upgrading in Global Value Chains (GVCs):** Focus on upskilling and social upgrading in GVCs, including incentives to develop more complex writing and numeracy skills in line with the Agenda 2030, while at the same time assessing the validity of outsourcing as it affects all skill levels and sectors.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE OECD WORK ON SKILLS

- Update the OECD Skills Strategy in line with future challenges coming from globalization and increasing inequality, climate change, economic instability, offshoring, migration and technological advancements and the automation of occupational tasks;
- Focus on lifelong learning, skills ecosystems and public policies that encourage quality workplace learning and VET across all skills levels;
- Expand work on competency areas with deficiency as well as on the equality of opportunity for access to education, skills and training systems for vulnerable groups;
- Identify best practices for effective stakeholder engagement;
- Link up diverse OECD projects, in particular on rising inequality, youth unemployment and digital skills;
- Analyse policy pathways to maximize the impact of skills investments;
- Commit to developing **a greater focus on unions as skills providers and actors in national systems and consider ways to build capacity and support effective union involvement** in future OECD analysis and discussions on education and training systems (and specifically on VET, Higher Education and Life Long Learning), as important stakeholders in helping achieving a just transition to the digital economy, the integration of migrants, in addressing the NEETs challenge and in bringing people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds into quality jobs;

We therefore call on the OECD to launch a **dialogue process** through TUAC to:

- Review the literature and identify gaps where further research would be valuable on the role of unions
- Explore the possibility of developing a stand-alone study on social partnership and ways to build effective stakeholder approaches on skills
- Set up a TUAC-OECD Secretariat meeting to discuss the above.